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## ***OPINION-EDITORIAL***

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### **The Farm Bill: Growing stability for farmers and consumers**

After two years of meetings, hearings, and negotiations, the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002, known as "the Farm Bill," is finally going to become a reality. There have been many criticisms of the new legislation that sets farm policy for the next six years, but those complaints often miss the goal of the bill.

The purpose of this year's Farm Bill is to ensure the American people have access to a safe, affordable and stable food supply. This Farm Bill will cost the average American family about 3 cents per day, covering everything from conservation to rural development, research, payments to farmers, and even the school lunch program.

#### **Producers need stability**

When farm commodity programs were first authorized in the early 1930s, most of the nation's six million farms were diversified and small by today's standards. Twenty-five percent of the nation's population lived on a farm. Today, that number has shrunk to just 2 percent of the population actively engaged in production agriculture.

Since the first Farm Bill, agriculture has undergone a significant transformation. Most of our domestic food supply is produced by fewer, larger and more specialized farm and livestock operations. Most of the nation's two million farmers are primarily part-time, where operators rely on off-farm earnings for much of their income.

With the traditionally low return on investment in the agricultural sector and high risk created by the uncertainty of the weather and markets, it is essential that the government protect its domestic food supply. Farm assistance payments, which only account for one-fourth of the agriculture budget, not only assist this low-margin industry fraught with risk, but also protect consumers from the risk of shortage and volatile costs of an uncertain food supply.

The 1996 Farm Bill was considered revolutionary because of the flexibility it afforded farmers. However, producers have told lawmakers that while they liked the new flexibility, more stability is needed for farmers to be successful.

**--MORE--**

## **The Farm Bill is good everyone, not just farmers**

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This year's legislation increases the safety net for producers by including a fixed amount for disaster assistance to be spent over the next 10 years, rather than forcing farmers to wait on Congress to act every year through disaster payments. Unfortunately, agriculture disasters happen every year. This bill recognizes that fact and introduces greater predictability for farmers.

## **Food should not be used as a weapon**

Opening more markets to U.S. products is essential to keeping the farm economy healthy. I fought for several years to lift sanctions on trade with Cuba, Iran, Libya, Sudan and North Korea. While that battle was won, I'm disappointed that the Farm Bill does not include a provision to allow private financing of agricultural sales to Cuba. Cuba, which has already agreed to buy \$3.5 million in Washington apples and dry peas, is estimated to be a \$1 billion market for U.S. agricultural products. I believe that our farmers would have the potential to reap larger sales to Cuba had private financing been allowed.

## **Conservation, rural investment, and research make up significant parts of the Farm Bill**

The new Farm Bill provides an 80 percent increase in spending for conservation programs, with significant increases going to the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) to address ground water conservation issues, as well as the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), Wildlife Habitats Program (WHIP) and the Farmland Protection Program (FPP). Rural credit programs are authorized in the Farm Bill that enable rural communities to improve their water and sewer programs and enhance broadband and local television service, in addition to assistance for firefighter and emergency personnel training. Agriculture research is the backbone of our nutritious, stable food supply. This bill authorizes increased funding for research programs by \$80 million a year to help find ways to increase resistance to pests, disease and drought while also developing healthier and more productive crop varieties for the growing world population.

## **Nutrition programs constitute the bulk of ag spending**

Nutrition programs that benefit children, seniors and low-income citizens account for about 55 percent of total USDA spending. Nutrition program funding is increased \$6.4 billion in this year's Farm Bill to enhance many of the assistance programs available to children, seniors and others in need of help. The bill provides additional food to the school lunch program including a pilot program that will provide fresh fruits and vegetables free to schools.

We have learned from our experience with our energy supply that being in a position of relying on foreign markets for necessities can lead to great uncertainty and instability. This Farm Bill makes sure that American farmers and consumers don't face that same instability crisis with one of our most precious resources: our food supply.

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